'The Finishing Touch' and the tradition of homoerotic girls' school fictions.

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Abstract:
Understanding Brigid Brophy's 'The Finishing Touch' presupposes familiarity with the lesbian tradition in literature presented in girls' school fiction. The title itself puns on the erotic element of the novel, which is a gentle parody of the preceding works of this genre. Though it is lightly written, it is a landmark in lesbian and antihomophobic literature. This metafictive bildungsroman reveals that homophobia and its antidote have the same roots: the inability and the ability to play with language.

Full Text:
Upon her death, the British novelist Sarah Scott (1732-1795) requested that her personal papers, including her intimate correspondence with her longtime companion Barbara Montagu, be destroyed.(1) Yet given the suave, bravura skill with which, two hundred years later, Miss Antonia Mount, the headmistress in Brigid Brophy's comic masterpiece of girls' school homo-eroticism The Finishing Touch (1963), negotiates the differences between the appearance of innocently platonic "romantic friendship" and the reality of lesbian sexuality, we might surmise that she has read the occlusions and absences in the tradition of her predecessors as signposts of the "love that dare not speak its name." This literary tradition of female homosocial passion and idealism in women's schools dates as far back as Scott's A Description of Millenium Hall (1762), which portrays a conventlike community of happily unmarried women preserving their independence and contentment while pursuing their love of aesthetics and learning in a pastoral Greco-Roman-style country house. Scott's work comes near the beginning of a long series of homoerotic fictions in all-women schools that include, most prominently, Colette's Claudine at School (1900), Gertrude Stein's Fernhurst (1904), Ivy Compton-Burnett's More Women than Men (1933), Christa Winsloe's The Child Manuela (1933), Dorothy Strachey's Olivia (1949), Muriel Spark's The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1961), and Brophy's The Finishing Touch.

While originary historical moments are difficult to pinpoint with accuracy - indeed, Sappho's school for girls on Lesbos may represent the beginnings in Western culture of this homoerotic pedagogical tradition - lesbian social historians such as Lillian Faderman have argued that modern lesbian identity dates from the so-called Scotch Verdict Trial of 1811, in which two teachers in an all-girls school, Miss Woods and Miss Pirie, were accused of engaging in "improper" displays of affection in front of their charges and therefore of corrupting the morals of children.(2) After much tribulation, the two women were exonerated, in large part because the judges were more terrified of admitting the reality of female-female sexual passion than in prosecuting those involved in the supposed crime.

In the wake of this ambivalent acquittal - which was subsequently transformed into a tragic lesbian melodrama ending in suicide in Lillian Hellman's The Children's Hour (1934) - an atmosphere of suspicion, arousal, and possibility clung to the institution of the girls' school. Indeed, The Finishing Touch, the title of which puns on both the act of masturbation and transformative erotic "touch" of lesbian culture transmitted to the girls in this "finishing" school, provides the comic metafictive "finish" to the tradition of girls' school fictions governed by what Martha Vicinus terms the dynamic of "distance and desire," in which self-control and academic discipline are manifestations of sublimated erotic desire for an admired teacher or older student.(3) The Finishing Touch, which affectionately parodies and outs the lesbian desires of its literary predecessors, depends on readers' acquaintance with this tradition for much of its subtle meanings. Because the aptly named Miss Antonia Mount knows how to employ covert metaphor, textual allusion, and double entendre to transform her students into subversive readers of literature, she succeeds in transcending or "mounting" the cultural prohibitions against lesbian passion, thus ensuring the continued existence of her ecole - or, in the words of the early twentieth century lesbian writer Liane de Pougy, her idylle - Sapphique. Moreover, Brophy grafts the highly stylized camp aesthetics of her beloved literary forebear Ronald Firbank - who himself wrote frequently about lesbians - onto the tradition of homoerotic pedagogical fictions; thus, her finishing school becomes a doubly queer site in which learning and female bonding are linked with eros and eloquence as the students (and readers) are given charming lessons in the arts of manipulating the cultural semiotics of the (in)significance of lesbian love for their own significant pleasures.

The oblique Firbankian plot of this novella turns on the arrival of the English royal daughter, otherwise known simply as "royalty" or

"H.R.H.", to the school. While Miss Mount and her closeted lesbian partner Miss Hettie Braid interpret her enrollment as a sign of the growing fame of their school and Miss Mount even anticipates that she will be made a "Dame," in the flesh H.R.H. proves both an aesthetic disappointment and a considerable pedagogical challenge.(4) Ironically, Miss Mount's success as a teacher has depended on her talent for acculturating her students by transforming them into sophisticated interpreters of the homoerotic subtexts of the ostensibly straight world. H.R.H., whose outward deportment ironically coincides with stereotypes of female "inverts" as hommes manques, is, in reality, completely devoid of queer sensibility. Indeed, she seems to have walked (straight) off the pages of Radclyffe Hall's sentimental medical sexologist apologia for female "inversion," The Well of Loneliness (1928). Soon after she disembarks from her British destroyer (which Miss Mount calls "The last flicker . . . of gunboat diplomacy" [11]), she greets the headmistresses by saying," 'Smashing trip! Smashing to see you! Smashing . . .' " (50), then, in her bumptuous manner, proceeds to smash an antique hydrangea pot. Later, she boisterously inquires after the "playing fields . . . For rounders" (52), blissfully unaware that the school gardens, with their "secluded corners, sunken spots, grottoes one would never guess were there" (52), are designed for more private lesbian erotic sports. In attempting to fill the empty brains of this royal "head" of British society, Miss Mount, who understandably feels more languidly world-weary than ever in the face of such purblind ignorance, confronts her greatest challenge in her career as a queer pedagogue.

Before the impromptu arrival of royalty, Miss Mount, with the unsuspecting assistance of Miss Braid - who seems not altogether cognizant of the lesbian nature of her own adoration of Miss Mount - had run their school on the French Riviera - which openly advertises itself in its prospectus for the "Personal attention and care of the joint head mistresses for each girl" (10) - as a covert sapphic utopia whose international cast of students recalls the habitues of the health resort in Firbank's Valmouth. The lovely Regina Outre-Met provides, in her role (as her name suggests) as the "Overseas Queen" of the finishing school, an enchanting French homoerotic counterpart to the bovine asexuality of English royalty. Regina, an especially promising scholar, is so enamored of Miss Mount that she tears her embossed name from a piece of the school's stationery and "wriggle[s] the die-stamped words in such a way as surreptitiously to caress them against the flesh of her bosom" (18). La Badessa di Poggibonsi, a "secular Abbess" (20) who inherited the title from her proto-Renaissance female forebears, walks about in a pair of stiletto sandals fastened with a "large white plastic daisy" (21). Fraise du Bois, a nineteen-year-old registered drug addict "already well advanced down the slope pioneered by her cousin Blanche" (21) - the latter whom readers will recognize as Tennessee Williams's fictionalized self-portrait as the heroine of A Streetcar Named Desire - provides fewer disciplinary problems than the rest of the pupils combined, "droguee," as Miss Mount observes, "as the poor creature is from dawn to dusk" (22). The Monacan heiress Miss Jones disports herself in a bikini, while the Lebanese (read Lesbian) princess, evidently something of a dildo fancier, obligingly tosses out her "exotic" and "one or two erotic" objects (67) in deference to the "discretion" (11) Miss Mount asks the girls to practice in the presence of H.R.H. The aristocratic President's daughter of a "dark republic" (22) inspires Miss Mount to conduct eroticized imaginative "experiments" (23) with her appearance because her "bloomy skin" is a "natural show-case . . . for jewels" (23). At last, the Plash sisters, Sylvie and Eugenie, whose surnames recall both the slang term for homosexual schoolgirl "crushes" (i.e., "pashes") and the dualistic character of the relentlessly fatalistic, documentary style, and (alas and at last) hopelessly heterosexual American poet Sylvia Plath, eventually prove the occasion for near tragedy.

The new discretion Miss Mount asks her pupils to display before royalty has the ironic effect of forcing consciousness of lesbianism to the surface. Before the advent of H.R.H., Miss Mount's more encoded social references to sapphic "knowledge" are evident in her dealings with the Catholic Church and reveal how readily lesbianism can slip between the cracks of traditional moral injunctions against birth control and prenuptial heterosexual sex. Miss Mount, annoyed that she must conduct her Catholic girls not only to church on Sunday mornings but also to confession on Saturday evenings, informs the parish priest that "none of her girls had anything to confess" (25), which echoes almost verbatim the words of Una Troubridge, the lover of the British lesbian novelist Radclyffe Hall, who, when asked how she and "John" reconciled their lesbianism with their Catholicism replied, "There was nothing to confess."(5) Since the Catholic Church opposes precautionary steps and "rhythm seemed not to be in the nature of girls" (26), Miss Mount fears that "we shall one day find ourselves trapped between the two kinds of irregularity to which girls are prone" (26). In other words, parents might blame her for the heterosexual and homosexual irregularities of her charges, an anxiety that the Cardinal alleviates by allowing that the girls might confess only during their vacations. Nonetheless, to remain on the safe side, Miss Mount is more "insistent with the Catholic girls than the others in bidding them, if they should by chance have that capacity, satisfy themselves with the company of their own sex" (27). Thus Catholicism, in its doctrinal incoherencies, proves (as Firbank himself well knew) quite friendly to the conversion of religious into lesbian meanings as long as the actual state of affairs is not made too explicit.

This somewhat comfortable (if enervating) state of quasi-closeted, quasi-encoded lesbian meaning, so common in earlier homoerotic girls' school fictions, is transformed by the revolutionary disequilibrium introduced into this social microcosm by royalty. Determined simultaneously to amend and expose the privileged obtuseness of H.R.H. (who seems beyond the need for intelligence) and, moreover, to pursue her erotic interest in Eugenie Plash and Regina Outre-Mer, Miss Mount decides to start one of the earlier informal course offerings in lesbian studies, "a special Literature group" (55). It begins, appropriately enough, with the poems of Renee Vivien, an early twentieth-century expatriate American lesbian poet who wrote homoerotic verse in French inspired by Sappho. In the face of this unmistakable and explicit queer knowledge, Eugenie "pouts," Regina "blushes," the President's daughter "seem[s] not to care," and H.R.H. remains "deep-puzzled," thus confirming each of them in, respectively, their aversion, desire, indifference, or incomprehension vis-a-vis lesbian passion.(6) The conspiratorial Plash sisters begin to deride Regina, who cannot understand why anyone would not love Miss Mount, for her worship of the headmistress and tell various mean-spirited inside jokes about the engrained block-headedness of H.R.H. and the "drinking habits" (another code for lesbian habits) of Miss Mount. In the meantime, Miss Mount, who now aches with desire for Regina, must convince her partner that she persists in these classes from her pure educational motive of vanquishing the ignorance of royalty and thus combating the "doom" of talented people, as Miss Braid herself conveniently expresses it, of being "misunderstood" (85). Thus the class proceeds with Proust's classic of torrid lesbian desire Albertine Disparue, which, while met with blankness by H.R.H., inspires in Miss Mount an almost uncontrollable urge to kiss Regina, if only she could "rely on [royalty's] uncomprehension - of everything" (71). Now desperate for Regina (a state she once again presents to Miss Braid as a heroic struggle against the intellectual doltishness of H.R.H.), Miss Mount decides to "force" (86) clear understanding on her pupils by having them read Colette's Claudine a l'ecole. This is a potentially perilous choice for the adored

authoritative teacher in her still delicate situation with Regina, for this book portrays the rambunctiously aggressive adolescent schoolgirl Claudine as a ready and willing seducer of her older teacher. Fortunately, the book makes Regina laugh, a sign that she welcomes (and will eventually act upon) the sexual component of her love for Miss Mount.

The erotic possibilities between adored teacher and desired pupil are developing beautifully according to pedagogical plan when an accidental act of nature, in collusion with the machinations of the Plash sisters, who have been looking for incontestable documentary evidence of Miss Mount's lesbianism, intervenes. H.R.H. is stung by the fatal "guepe du midi" (101), or the midday wasp, an occurrence which provides both the climactic turning point and the quasi-naturalized dea ex machina of the plot. Miss Mount, wishing all the while that she might thus have permission to kiss "innocently" the bosom of Regina, overcomes her considerable aversion for the person of H.R.H. and sucks the venom of the wasp bite from the "royal decolletage" (102). Yet while Miss Mount can remove the literal poison, she cannot completely innoculate herself against the far more insidious social venom produced by the persistent obtuseness of royalty or the homophobic malice of the Plash sisters. Indeed, the sisters, who have been observing this scene of rescue from their window, furnish the local newspaper with a photograph which shows Miss Mount in the apparent act of kissing Royalty on the bosom. That Miss Mount feels no attraction for H.R.H. does not prevent the Plash sisters from interpreting her action as an attempt to curry favor in high places (and subvert British social authority) by converting royalty to lesbianism, nor does it prevent the newspaper from reprinting the photograph along with a scandalous headline: "Etrange Affection entre Professeur et Eleve" (115).

This false public outing, the result of both an idiotic failure to discern the differences between appearances and realities and the false social ambitions and snobberies introduced by royalty, is, in some measure, propelled by the convoluted dynamics of erotic jealousy that is a staple of girls' school fictions such as Olivia and The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. If Miss Mount, the evident favorite among the pupils of the two officially "co-equal, co-eval, co-proprietors" (12), has a tragic flaw (or, alternately, a redeeming grace) it is her marked preference for beautiful young women. She directs all her attention toward her attractive and talented lesbian-leaning students such as Regina Outre-Met and Eugenie Plash, leaving her partner Miss Braid to deal with less fetching heterosexual-leaning girls such as Sylvie Plash, whom the deep-voiced Miss Braid upbraids for receiving letters from a "coarse" (7) sailor by informing her that "men are coarse" (12). This moralistic pedagogy (although a matter of sexual and aesthetic taste for Miss Mount and physical aversion and self-closeting for Miss Braid) fails, and, combined with the destabilizing presence of H.R.H., the subtle competition between Eugenie Plash and Regina Outre-Mer for the affection of Miss Mount, the growing conspiratorial designs of the Plash sisters, and, most important, the exposure to lesbian-themed literature (which can either infect students with or innoculate them against the poison of homophobia) leads to the infamous venom-sucking scene, in which Miss Mount comes close to losing her career by heroically saving the life of royalty.

Although an ostensibly lighthearted novel, The Finishing Touch contains an important message about the need for constant watchfulness among queers, inasmuch as the venom of homophobia and its antidote spring from similar sources and depend on how individuals respond to the power conferred on them by sexual knowledge. Indeed, the headmistresses eventually succeed in innoculating themselves against the various poisons that inevitably accompany queer life, from the comical vagaries of role playing through the politics of religion and public scandal. Through the quasi-operatic distinction between the soprano voice of Miss Mount and the baritone of Miss Braid, the two women are initially established as a prototypical femme-butch couple. But these appearances prove misleading, all the more so as Miss Braid is far more reticent to acknowledge or recognize her lesbianism than Miss Mount. In the beginning the ever solicitous and "masculine" Miss Braid spends her time anticipating the needs and alleviating the distresses of the "feminine" Miss Mount. After the arrival of H.R.H., however, their positions are reversed. Miss Mount must soothe the persistent apprehensions of Miss Braid, who fears (accurately, as it turns out) that some bizarre and unforseen catastrophe will befall H.R.H. and, therefore, them. In the end Miss Mount must once again act heroically to save the school from disrepute by seducing Commander Curl, a closeted homosexual British naval officer who has been sent to determine whether intelligence reports that the women are running a sapphic school for scandal are true. In this early exploration of the duplicities inherent in the policy of "don't ask, don't tell," Miss Mount succeeds in vanquishing her political opponents by deploying their own weapons against them. Moreover, Miss Mount uses the Commander to relieve what she refers to as "the tensions, the hysteria, the really at times too insupportable emotional fraught-ness, of these all-female institutions" (126-27), which, of course, alludes to her frustrated sexual longings for Regina Outre-Mer.

As in her earlier dealings with the Catholic Church, in her confrontations with British Intelligence Miss Mount is aided in large measure by the unspeakability of lesbianism. For example, when the intelligence officers ask for background information on "this Mount woman" to determine whether she's "that kind of woman" (119), one officer thinks this means "communist" (an accusion frequently launched at queers), and another fears he cannot "write . . . down" the "salient facts in memorandum form" (120). While Miss Mount and Miss Braid lose most of their pupils, including Regina Outre-Mer and even the droguee Fraise du Bois, in the wake of the newspaper scandal, they almost immediately receive "several new applications" (124). Although Miss Braid wonders whether the new students will be "quite the type of girl we want," Miss Mount (in yet another reversal of type) confidently replies that "they will be in some ways even more the . . ." (124). Although Miss Mount trails off before substituting the word "lesbian" for "girl," her conception of the mission of her finishing school has clearly undergone a radical transformation. By forcing what Virginia Woolf termed "this very queer knowledge" to new levels of awareness, the scandal caused by the collision of social snobbery and envious malice with idealistic love and passionate desire ultimately strengthens the hand of queer education and helps to fulfill the ambition, expressed by Miss Mount near the beginning of the text, that her school might encourage lesbianism as an adult way of life rather than a mere adolescent passing phase: "We are supposed to send them away finished. Though in some cases . . . I prefer to think I've sent them away just begun" (12-13).

Originally published in 1963, The Finishing Touch represents an important milestone in the history of lesbian and, more broadly, antihomophobic literature. Affectionately sophisticated in its treatment of its predecessors in Firbankian, French homosexual, and homoerotic girls' school fiction, Brophy's metafictional comic masterpiece in the end both accompanies and acknowledges a new and more explicit brand of lesbian bildungsroman as represented by, among others, Maureen Duffy's moving depiction of a working-class

lesbian child's fight to receive an education in That's How It Was (1962), Rosemary Manning's autobiographical treatment of lesbianism, hypocrisy, and betrayal in a girls' boarding school in The Chinese Garden (1962), and Monique Wittig's innovative nouveau roman of the early development of lesbian consciousness in The Opoponax (1957; trans. 1964). Unlike these fictions, The Finishing Touch is not, as Brophy herself has repeatedly pointed out, either semiautobiographical or documentary. This does not, however, lessen this book's authority or importance as an imaginative metafictive comedy of manners that reveals that the roots of homophobia rest precisely in the inability to play with language and a dour insistence on the literality of meaning, both of which, finally, prove fatal to all erotic joyousness, imaginative empathy, and creative liberty.

NOTES

1 See Jane Spencer, introduction to A Description of Millenium Hall by Sarah Scott (New York: Penguin/Virago, 1986), ix.

2 See Lillian Faderman, Scotch Verdict: Miss Pirie and Miss Woods v. Dame Cumming Gordon (New York: William Morrow, 1985).

3 Martha Vicinus, "Distance and Desire: English Boarding School Friendship, 1870-1920," in Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1989), 212.

4 Brigid Brophy, The Finishing Touch (London: GMP, 1987), 12; hereafter cited parenthetically.

5 Michael Baker, Our Three Selves: The Life of Radclyffe Hall (New York: Morrow, 1985), 357.

6 Eugenie's sudden conversion to distaste for lesbianism seems somewhat puzzling given that shortly before the arrival of royalty, she had commented "affectionately, and slightly boasting of her knowledge," that Miss Mount always read Theophile Gautier's classic of cross-dressed lesbian love, Mademoiselle de Maupin, "the night before an Occasion" (40). Perhaps Eugenie prefers the covert "butch" dynamics of cross-dressed homosexual passion to those of overt lesbian love or, alternately, feels bested by the lovely Regina Outre-Mer. Indeed, Miss Mount herself complicates this problem by her occasional inability to discriminate adequately between the Plash sisters, which might exacerbate Eugenie's resentment.

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